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Home rule and the transit
problem in New York City

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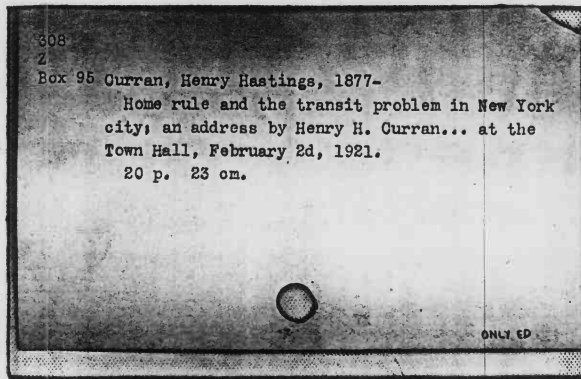
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Home Rule and the Transit
Problem in New York City

An Address

by

HENRY H. CURRAN

President of the Borough of Manhattan



AT THE

TOWN HALL

February 2d, 1921

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THE discussion tonight turns upon the best way of improving the passenger transportation service within the boundaries of the City of New York. We all agree that there is room for improvement. We differ only as to certain features of the plan, proposed with such courage and ability, by Governor Miller. We are all with him in his public-spirited endeavor to help us out of the inconvenience and actual suffering that attends us as we go to and fro about the town, and, in that endeavor, he deserves the commendation of every good citizen, regardless of party, purse, or prejudice. Let me say right here that, while I disagree with the Governor, fundamentally and irrevocably, in what I term the deliberate invasion of home rule in New York City that his plan involves, I have no patience with those who are trying to make personal political capital out of the efforts of a conscientious official to help us out of a serious situation.

We shall approach our subject with a better understanding, if we glance first at the causes of our distress. The trouble with transit in our town is a combination of crooked finance and dishonest politics that has pursued us for nearly a hundred years. And, gentlemen, the State has been just as bad as the City. Even in the early days there were potent lobbies at Albany in the interest of stage coaches as against horse car lines, and from that day to this, the transit needs of New York City have been the football of finance and politics, both in Albany and at the City Hall. We have not forgotten the Albany lobbies during the years before the first elevated road was built; nor have we forgotten Jake Sharp and the bundle Board of Aldermen down here in 1884. We remember, even more vividly, the high finance that has well nigh wrecked our surface car system within even the last twenty years. But, while the stock jobbers and the politicians were engaged in this game, the people of the City have borne the burden, and the results have made strap-hangers of us all.

I had hoped that this game was played out, but let us see what we have encountered within the last two years. The high

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"HOME RULE FOR CITIES"

"We favor granting to all cities and villages adequate powers of self government and control over their local affairs and property and the transaction of municipal business, subject to proper constitutional safeguards and the general laws of the state, but free from legislative interference in purely local matters."—REPUBLICAN PLATFORM, Saratoga Springs, July 27, 28, 1920.

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CROOKED FINANCE AND DISHONEST POLITICS

We shall approach our subject with a better understanding, if we glance first at the causes of our distress. The trouble with transit in our town is a combination of crooked finance and dishonest politics that has pursued us for nearly a hundred years. And, gentlemen, the State has been just as bad as the City. Even in the early days there were potent lobbies at Albany in the interest of stage coaches as against horse car lines, and from that day to this, the transit needs of New York City have been the football of finance and politics, both in Albany and at the City Hall. We have not forgotten the Albany lobbies during the years before the first elevated road was built; nor have we forgotten Jake Sharp and the boodle Board of Aldermen down here in 1884. We remember, even more vividly, the high finance that has well nigh wrecked our surface car system within even the last twenty years. But, while the stock jobbers and the politicians were engaged in this game, the people of the City have borne the burden, and the results have made strap-hangers of us all.

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prices, consequent upon the war, are not the sole cause of our present troubles. They have merely disintegrated and made worse the financial and political wreckage of years gone by. They are utterly secondary to the present attitude of those who could help us, but will not.

We are the victims, today, of a vicious triangle, at one corner of which stands Mr. Hedley, at another Mayor Hylan, while the third was recently occupied by Commissioner Nixon. Mr. Hedley has stated openly, before the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, that he would not make a proposition to the City, and that he stood on his legal rights. He has asked for an eight cent fare, but offers nothing in return. He asks equity from the City, but offers none from the company. The present Board of Estimate and Apportionment has taken full political advantage of this arbitrary and high-handed position, but it has made no constructive, unbiased endeavor to get the facts, to study the situation, to recommend remedies. What we need is something constructive, but their only aim has been to obstruct, and reap what political advantage they can from that course, at the expense of the comfort and decency of every man, woman, and child in the City of New York. The third element was supplied by Mr. Nixon, the burden of whose song, throughout his brief term of office, was an eight cent fare.

The amenities between Mayor Hylan and Mr. Hedley are equalled by those that have passed between Mayor Hylan and Commissioner Nixon. Not one of the three has led us out of the woods, and they are charged by the law and the fact with that duty. Governor Smith, in his 1918 campaign, promised relief, if the Legislature would give him a new Public Service Commission. The Legislature gave him the new Commission, but there is no relief. Governor Smith gave us only Nixon, who accomplished nothing.

Governor Miller is the first man, in a position that carries power with it, who has put his shoulder to the wheel and tried to help. Let that be considered in connection with the little mutual admiration meeting held, in the City Hall, the other day, by the legislators from this City who are politically opposed to the Governor. I do not imagine that we shall take seriously the political twittering of those four and twenty blackbirds in their endeavor to rehabilitate a discredited City Administration by chirping at Governor Miller.

A CONSTRUCTIVE PLAN

Now, I shall submit to you my own constructive plan, and stand on that. Then, I shall submit, with due deference, the basis of my disagreement with the suggestion that the State of New York take away from the people of our City, a portion of the home rule to which we have attained with such prolonged effort and trouble.

This is my plan in a nutshell. Create a new Public Service Commission who will get the facts and recommend the remedies, but whose recommendations, as to a temporary or permanent increase in fare, or changes in contracts, must be approved by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment before they can become effective.

A FIVE CENT FARE

I agree with Governor Miller that the present Public Service Commission and Transit Construction Commission, each a one-headed affair, should be superseded at once, by a commission of three residents of this city, who have lived here long enough to understand our people, and who will be appointed by the Governor, with full power to do all that the present commissions have the power to do. It was a mistake to resolve one commission into two. Let us reconstitute them as one body of three men. Three heads are better than one, and there is plenty of work ahead for three. We have had enough of one-man deliberation from the day Mr. Nixon accepted his appointment and began to proclaim an increased fare as the undiluted millennium of all our traction troubles.

Let this new commission gather the facts. Let companies who ask relief, make their case before the commission, showing the need for relief, stating the kind of relief desired, and, more important than all, let them tell us at the beginning, what they are going to give to the City in return for this relief. I believe that when the facts are known, this Commission will place before the public, a plan that is based on a five cent fare.

That expresses merely my own belief, I have not all the facts, nor has anybody in the City of New York. We have never had a competent, unprejudiced investigation that will give us all the facts. That we must have first. My own impressions are based on a very considerable study of the whole situation, which I have conducted ever since I have been in my present office.

I have held my peace until this evening, but the impression I receive from the days and nights I have put in on this subject, is, that we can weather through, with better service and with fairness to all, on a five cent fare. If a square deal requires an increase, the people will willingly pay it, but we have got to be shown.

We are the legatees of generations of crooked finance and dishonest politics, as I have stated before, and we are suspicious. We see every day, as we cling to the straps, statements of the *Subway Sun* pasted on the car windows, that are 50% false, because they tell only half the truth. We know that while the Interborough fell short of earning its undeserved preferential by \$3,500,000. in 1919, it fell short only \$1,500,000. in 1920. We know that half of this preferential is a mere perpetuation of past profits. We know that the company's revenues are increasing while their operating expenses are standing still, although they tell you the opposite. We know that they give you figures for the months between July and November, but they do not tell you that those are the lean months in subway traffic, and they do not give you the figures for the fat months. Do you know that there were four months, last winter, in which, taken by themselves, money was earned for the City's Subway investment over and above rentals, taxes, operating expenses, preferential, and everything else? No, they don't tell us that. We must get those facts for ourselves through this commission. Do you know that the red cars of the Third Avenue surface system are solvent today on a five cent fare? Do you know that there are two little trolley lines in this City, that are doing well on a three cent fare? These are all intricate, difficult matters to be examined carefully, and impartially, by a capable commission.

But the first factor is service. That is what we buy and pay for. Today, we are buying damaged goods. We want no more of that kind. Let us improve the quality of the service, and then consider what it is worth, and pay for that and no more. I believe this commission may, within certain hours, find for a four cent fare instead of a five-cent fare.

Do you know that some of the department stores give lower prices to those who shop within certain hours? I noticed the other day, that in one store, you could buy seersucker gingham—whatever that may be—for 17 cents a yard in the morning, but if you bought it in the afternoon, you had to pay 30 cents a yard

for it. The result was, that everybody in town who was after seersucker gingham went shopping in the morning instead of the afternoon, so that the shopping crowd was more evenly distributed over the whole day.

Last winter I offered a suggestion that some transportation companies might pick up a lot of business by offering their service for four cents, within certain hours that are close to the present rush hours. People will shop for a four-cent fare just as they will shop for 17-cent seersucker gingham, just as water finds its own level. There is not a penny to be saved in this town that is so elusive but what a lot of people will find it out and save it. This reward might even bring about different opening and closing hours in business establishments. During the period of the influenza, that plan was carried out voluntarily, and very successfully, for the sake of the health of the community. Is it not worth while to try distributing the traffic load in this fashion, so that all cars will be more nearly comfortably full, instead of having some cars rolling empty, while other cars are crowded to the point of scandal? We have tried to distribute traffic in terms of space, but have made no attempt to do it in terms of time. A great many thinking people agree with me that there is something in this. So much for service and fares.

When the new commission has gathered and studied all the facts, let it propose its remedy, openly, and to all the people of the City. Then let there be full public discussion of these proposals, so that every citizen may have ample opportunity to pass judgment upon them. If the commission's plan is good, the public will favor it, and the Board of Estimate and Apportionment will be compelled to approve of it. If the plan is bad, the people may reject it through the refusal of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, elected by the people, to approve it. In either event, we shall come to a settlement, and it will be a settlement by the people, of their own transit problem and their own transit properties, through their own duly elected representatives. It is time to get underway with that.

Mr. Chairman, I cannot do justice to this subject in twenty minutes. You have asked me to cover a hundred years of home rule and rapid transit in the second city of the world, a city of six million people, with 1700 miles of cartrack capitalized at a

billion dollars, including the water, and carrying over two billion passengers a year; a city of rivers, hills, islands, bridges, and tunnels, a topographical Chinese puzzle, with a heritage of generations of political and financial rascality that have left us these old cartracks below, and the straps above, and little else compared with what we might have had. Add to that our insensate insistence that we must all be in the same place at the same time, at work or at play, no matter how we get there or how we get back. Can you cover that in twenty minutes? I cannot, so I shall, with your permission, drive directly at my disagreement with the Governor on the fundamental American principle of home rule in government. This is where I halt in going along with the Governor's plan. We discussed this in December before he took office, and we disagreed then. Our discussion in the hearing, which he held at Albany on January 25th, was merely a public repetition of what we had said before.

Let us see now what this home rule thing is, whether it is merely a matter of "loose talk and loose thinking," or whether it is something better and sounder than that, and something which is fundamental to our present transit problem.

In the first place, I shall not discuss here the legal power of the State of New York through its Legislature to provide that this new Public Service Commission may make and unmake contracts existing between the City and the transportation companies, without regard to any consent or approval of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment as representing the people of this City and their power and process of local self-government. That is a question of law. My discussion will go solely to the question of policy. Governor Miller states in his message that:

"The vital thing to do at the moment it to create the agency to deal with the problem with ample and undivided authority and responsibility."

And he adds:

"The necessity of doing that does not appear to me to be open to debate."

He says further:

"There is a good deal of loose talk about home rule in connection with this subject. The problem is not a local problem. It is a State problem."

He also says that:

"A tribunal responsible to local authorities cannot be expected to be impartial in a local case, and experience has shown that such tribunals are subject to local feelings and prejudices."

And he winds up with this specific statement:

"In view of the time required for some rate determinations, there should doubtless be power to prescribe temporary rates pending temporary determinations, with such safeguards as may be prescribed by the commission, and complete power should expressly be vested in the commission regardless of local consents or contracts."

He proposes, in brief, that any present requirement of the consent or approval of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment to anything, beyond the determination of routes, and the pledging of the City's credit, be done away with. He would give all the power to the new commission which he will appoint. If I read his message aright, he regards this centralization of power as essential, and yet I entertain the hope that his splendid desire for improving our transportation facilities may be accomplished without sacrificing this fundamental principle of home rule.

The Governor is quoted in the newspapers of last Friday.

A reporter asked him the following question:

"The question has been raised, Governor, as to whether the Transit Commission should have power to abrogate the subway contracts irrespective of whether the City had the right to?"

To which the Governor replied:

"Of course, not; nothing can be accomplished without negotiations. First, the facts must be ascertained. Second, a plan must be formulated, and third, the parties interested must agree on the plan. These are the logical steps which undoubtedly occur in solving the problem."

If that quotation represents the Governor's views, we have a most encouraging clarification of his message. We have his assurance that "the parties interested must agree on the plan,"

and certainly the people of the City of New York, as represented in their local government, are interested parties. Certainly they must agree before we carry out any plan. We, the people, own our subways ourselves. Remember that. We would not require merely the agreement of the commission and the companies. The people, as represented in their local government, are interested, as well as the commission and the companies. After all, it is the Legislature that will decide and will enact the law, and I hope, with all my heart, that they will carry out this step toward our transit relief, without sacrificing the whole endeavor and throwing it directly into politics by stripping us of our power over our own property.

HOME RULE

There was a time, as the Governor points out, when locally, we had nothing at all to say about these matters. The early franchises to the old horse car companies, then to the cable companies and the overhead and underground electric surface railway companies, were given out hither and yon by the Legislature in perpetuity, and without any decent consideration, whatsoever, in return. This was true until 1875. From that time until the present, it became necessary to secure our local consent, as to routes, before a road could be laid down in any of our streets.

In the exercise of this power of consent, from 1875 to 1907, the City Government placed, in most of the franchises, a stipulation for a five-cent fare, whenever an extension, or a new road was asked for. These five-cent fare provisions, which were tucked in in the interest of the public, are still there, and the Court of Appeals has ruled that they stick. If the tuck is to be taken out, let the City have something to say about it. Incidentally, it is the Board of Estimate and Apportionment that has, since 1905, exercised the franchise granting power, and it has exercised this power uniformly in the City's interest, without a breath of scandal.

With rapid transit, however, that is, trains of cars traveling rapidly as distinguished from single street cars traveling slowly, we finally came into our own, long after the elevated railroad franchises were given away in perpetuity, when we received from the State, in 1894, the right to municipal construction of subways, and finally, in 1906, the compulsion upon the Public Service Commission of securing the approval of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, before they might contract with

a company, not only as to routes, but as to the terms of the contract or franchise itself. That was the Elsberg Bill of fifteen years ago. That law has never been repealed, and, in 1913, our present splendid dual subway system was created upon contracts signed between the Public Service Commission and the Interborough and Brooklyn Rapid Transit concerns, to which was attached the approval of these contracts by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, because neither the commission nor the companies could make the contract without the approval of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, in other words, the local City Government.

The principal consideration of these contracts was the universal five-cent fare, to the end of breaking up the congestion of population in Manhattan, and giving people a breath of fresh air at the other end of a five-cent fare. The contracts themselves provided that they could not be modified in the future without the consent of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment. I know that the Board of Estimate and Apportionment of that year was not ready to approve these contracts at all, unless they included this provision against modification without the consent of the local City Government. Nothing in the law has ever taken that power of approval away from us, and nobody, except the companies themselves, has asked that it be taken away, until we come upon this request as proposed in the Governor's message.

So much for the history of our home rule in the transit field. But we must go back farther than that. The trend of one hundred years has marched steadily in the direction of more power to the local governments under a greater measure of home rule. I might, in passing, call your attention to a paragraph in Magna Charta—a Charter granted as long ago as 1215, the thirteenth paragraph of which reads as follows:

"and the City of London shall have all its liberties and free customs as well by land as by water. Moreover, we will and grant that all other cities and burroughs and town and ports shall have all their liberties and free customs."

In 1776, we find, in the Declaration of Independence, complaint against the King of Great Britain "for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering eventually the form of our governments; for suspending our own

legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever."

It was not until 1833 that the people of the City of New York were allowed to elect their Mayor. Prior to that time, we had our Mayor appointed for us by the Governor of the State. Then in 1846, we received the right to elect other local officers, and home rule for New York City was coming along gradually, but steadily, until 1857, when Fernando Wood was Mayor, and gave us a City Administration that looks like that of today. The State stepped in and decided to do our policing for us. It created a Metropolitan Police District, and the first attempt of these State "cops" to restore order in the City, resulted in a pitched battle on the steps of the City Hall between the City "cops" and the State "cops," which was ended only by the happy intervention of the Seventh Regiment, which happened to be marching down Broadway to take a steamboat to Boston, and learning of the trouble at the City Hall, waded in and sent both forces packing.

At the same time, the State created a Metropolitan Sanitary District and set out to take care of our health down here. They also assumed to manage Central Park and the Croton Aqueduct. But all these sudden steps backward disappeared in a very short time, and we received back our former powers of local self-government.

History shows that the people of our City have always been "hardboiled" on the subject of home rule. The first Governor who ran foul of it was that delightful old character, Peter Stuyvesant, who, in the days of the Dutch, stumped about on his wooden leg and sought to do it all himself. He was a soldier, and a Governor, but he had to stop and let the people do a little of it. This he did with the brusque good nature by which we remember the old fellow.

In 1894, City elections were separated from State and National Elections, and it was provided that special City Bills might not become a law, thereafter, unless accepted by the Mayor of the City, provided they were not passed over his veto. In 1913, the Legislature passed a home rule bill for this City. The Courts have found very little home rule in this bill, but it remains, at least, as an expression of hope in our favor.

So we have come along and, in that very same year of 1913, under the transit home rule of 1906 that I have referred to, we

took the biggest step forward in local passenger transportation that the City has ever seen. That was the year in which the contracts for the dual subway system were signed. We think we are at the depths of our traction troubles today, but they are not as bad as they were in those days of 1913, nor as bad as they were in the days of 1904, before the first subway was opened. Most of you can remember the crowding on the elevated railroads, and then the crowding in the first subway.

SUBWAYS, THE KEY

I do not say we are any better off today, but I do say that the statesmanship and vision into the future, of George McAneny and Commissioner Willcox and Commissioner Bassett, and all the rest, accomplished in that year a City work that is second to none in its own potency for future benefit. The financial terms of those contracts were unfair to the City, but in the long run, the subways are the key to the whole situation, and there lies the value to the City. As the Governor says they are "the back bone of our passenger transportation system." Not only that, they are the hope and the promise of our transportation future. They are the key, and we hold the key. The frame work is there. We have only to add to it, from time to time, by building new subways, and building them in the right places. That is the ultimate answer, as the Governor himself points out, to our whole problem. Eventually, we must and will have complete municipalization of our passenger traction, with the subway, elevated road, the surface car, and the bus, each fitting into its right place.

This deed was done under dual contract and not under exclusive control in a public service commission acting as an agency of the State. The commission worked with the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, and, in conjunction with each other, the trail was blazed.

Let us remember that, although the old Rapid Transit Commission built the first subway—and we can remember how we stood aghast, in 1904, at the idea of going underground from the City Hall to 42d Street in seven minutes—these cars had not been rolling two years before the people of the City discovered that this unified commission with exclusive power had ensconced, in the heart of the City's transportation system, a private company with a long lease, that was sitting down on a vested right

and, already, reaping inordinate profits from the growth of the City's population that all times supplies the gross revenue from passenger traffic. The moment the Company discovered that it was in a position of a profitable monopoly, it refused to budge. It was then, in 1906, that the people put into the law the requisite of the approval of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment for any future subway contract, in order that there might be a check on any future single commission with complete power.

We have, in the Congress of the United States, a Senate and a House of Representatives. We have, in every one of the forty-eight state legislatures, a Senate and an Assembly. We have, in this City, a Board of Estimate and a Board of Aldermen. We had, in 1913, a Public Service Commission and a Board of Estimate, and under that dual jurisdiction we did it. Where is the sanctity in the personnel of any single commission? Are these three new Commissioners the only men who can lead us out of the wilderness?

Supposing Governor Miller appoints as fine a Commission as ever existed, and they put forward a plan that meets public approval. Do you think a Board of Estimate can stand against such a plan if the people want the plan? The people have their remedy. They can elect a new Board of Estimate. Or they, through their own chosen legislators, can ask the Legislature to take away the power of approval from the Board of Estimate. Yes, at any time we can give away, if we so desire, a portion of the home rule that has come to us so slowly, but, I say it is a different thing for the Legislature of the State to take it away from us without our consent. Supposing the Commission is some day "ripped" out of office, and we are suddenly confronted with an incompetent or an unfair commission or worse, then, shall we be entirely happy in our recollection of the day when the check of the Board of Estimate was taken away from us? At that time, we might have a very good Board of Estimate and Apportionment.

There is no such thing as uniformly good Public Service Commissions and uniformly bad Boards of Estimate and Apportionment.

I am not saying that these 1913 subway contracts were perfect. They were very far from it, although they were a great step ahead, but, I am afraid, if we leave it to a single State commission, we are, some day, going to have these contracts modified

for the worse instead of for the better. The experience of over a hundred years of successful American government is not something to be lightly thrown aside for a passing emergency, and that experience is founded on the check of dual control. The Fathers founded well, and this device of theirs is a cord which runs through the whole of our Governmental structure.

I believe it is fundamental that we should keep power close to the people. I am not afraid of the people's judgment. As President Lincoln said, "You cannot fool all of the people all of the time." We have our snags and our failures and our troubles, but the deep stream of popular government has been running steadily on towards success ever since we began in 1789; and the very cornerstone of that conception of Government, laid in our Constitution, is, that power be delegated from the people upward and not downward toward the people from any passing ruler. That is what home rule means.

Of course, I know that the City of New York, like every other City in the State, is but a creature of the State and one of its chartered municipal corporations, and subject to the sovereign power of the State. To take a legalistic point of view, one may argue that, just because the State has the power, the State should take away from us, when it pleases, this specific power of home rule. I say that that reasoning leads us straight to abolition of City self-government in its entirety.

The spasm of 1857 was overthrown over night. They took away from us our Police Department, our Health Department, our Water Department, in that year, but they soon had to give them back again. We are having troubles in our local Police Department here today, but has anyone been heard to suggest that, because of these troubles, our local control be abolished, and that the Police Department of New York City be managed and administered from Albany?

CANNOT IGNORE THE CITY

No remedy for our transportation troubles can be really effective unless the City is consulted. If the members of the State Legislature take from us the fundamental measure of home rule that we now enjoy, they will throw a pressing question of public necessity once again into the maelstrom of politics. They will set us back fifteen years in our orderly City development. They will

create a gap of enmity and distrust between New York City and the rest of the State, and nothing could be more unfortunate for all of us. They will stop the betterment of this transportation problem, for the people of this City will never view with confidence the work of an agency that is sent down here from Albany, under the over-lordship of the State, to do our own local work for us and in spite of us.

The people of the City of New York possess, in the name of their City Government, property valued at two billion dollars, consisting of streets, parks, buildings, bridges, schools, docks, subways, water works, and everything else that comes within the scope of the local Government. Half of this has been paid for, but we are still in debt for a little over a billion dollars worth of it. That is our permanent funded debt, and it is divided, according to purpose, roughly as follows:

Subways	300 Million Dollars
Water	200 Million Dollars
Docks	100 Million Dollars
Schools	100 Million Dollars
Streets	100 Million Dollars
Bridges	100 Million Dollars
Buildings	100 Million Dollars
<hr/>	
	1,000 Million Dollars
	or One Billion Dollars

You will notice that the biggest item of all is subways. It is that particular portion of our property that Governor Miller proposes to administer, without leaving to us, the owners, one iota of control over this, our own property.

What would he say, and what would you say, if the President of the United States should suddenly announce his determination to have the Federal Government at Washington send a commission up here to build all of our City-owned docks, to regulate them, run them, and collect the rent from them? Would you, or not, have a word to say about it?

What would you say if the Governor should announce that the State of New York ought to send a commission down here from Albany to do the same thing for our water system?

There we have three different public utilities—subways, water and docks. We get our water from the very heart of the

State, in the Catskill and Schoharie water sheds, and it flows all the way south, down into New York City, but we hear nothing about the necessity for undivided State control of our own water works. Our docks are a pivotal part of the commerce of the Nation, flowing through the Port of New York, to every country in the world, but we have never heard a suggestion that they should be administered through an agency of the Federal Government at Washington.

But, the cars in our subways, where we have expended the most of the money that we still owe, do not roll one inch beyond the boundaries of the City of New York. They are as local as our police stations and fire houses, and, yet, it is here that the Governor would have the State step in and take hold of this property, and manage it for us.

CITY PLANNING, THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

Now, if I may have a minute or two more, I want to suggest that our local transportation problem goes far deeper than anything we have talked about tonight. Beyond all these questions of the proper governmental machinery with which to bring about good transit service for fair payment, the controlling consideration in our passenger transportation, as well as in our freight transportation, is one of city plan. That is the foundation of it all. And, right here, I give you, now, my own conception of the ultimate solution of the whole problem of overcrowding in New York City. In solving this problem, it is the Board of Estimate and Apportionment that must lead the way.

The City of New York is essentially a city of islands. Among all the five boroughs, there is only one boundary between boroughs that is not a river or a bay. That part of the line between Brooklyn and Queens that lies between the head of Newtown Creek—which flows into the East River—and the head of Spring Creek—which flows into Jamaica Bay—is the one boundary that is merely an arbitrary line on a map. The rest of our boundaries are water boundaries and were given to us by nature. If there were only a handful of people in each of these five island boroughs, the transportation from one to another would not be a difficulty. We began with ferry boats, but, as the City's population increased from decade to decade, we had to come to bridges, and then to tunnels. The speed of this increase in population has

outstripped our utmost endeavors to keep pace with it in the work of government. We are behind in the construction of homes, the building of schools, in policing, in fire fighting, but, more than all, in transportation, both freight and passenger. We have never caught up. If we had an even distribution of population among the five boroughs, we should still be behind. But, let us see what we have.

COBWEB TRANSIT

The City began developing in Manhattan from the Battery northward, and the trend went steadily northward through the length of this long, thin, island and into the Bronx, until it began to spill over eastward into Brooklyn and Queens, and, now, southward, to some extent, into Richmond. Our transit arteries, for years, were north and south lines, and the great preponderance of our roads and tubes today runs north and south. Added to this, we have all the lines radiating from lower Manhattan on one side of the East River to Brooklyn and Queens on the other. The result is a transportation system that consists of the hub of a wheel—that is lower Manhattan—with spokes radiating out in every direction from the hub, and ending in the air. There is no rim to this wheel; it is only hub and spokes. Here is a city plan that is fatal, on its face, to any comfortable transportation of our citizens. If you would go from the Bronx to Brooklyn, you must begin at the outer end of that spoke in the Bronx, go down into the hub in lower Manhattan, and, then, out another spoke until you land in the air again somewhere in Brooklyn. The same is true if you go from Brooklyn to Queens; you must go through lower Manhattan. What we need is a rim to that wheel, a belt line, and then another interior belt line, between the rim and the hub, so that people going from Brooklyn to Queens may go directly over a crosstown line instead of having to struggle through the congested hub of the wheel in lower Manhattan. The same holds true between Queens and the Bronx. The same holds true between Brooklyn and Richmond. Instead of a transportation picture that looks like the hub and spokes of a wheel without any rim, we should have the cobweb design. In a cobweb, you will find that the spider, wisely enough, provides a rim and interior rims, or laterals or belt lines, in addition to the strands that compose the hub and the spokes, and that is a sensible plan built by a sensible animal for business purposes.

And what makes it still worse is the futile fancy we have for doing our work as far away, as possible, from where we live. This is not our fault as individuals, nor that of our forefathers. It is the fault of a lack of government leadership that has allowed business and manufacturing to pile up in the lower part of the Island of Manhattan. As soon as the ground itself was all occupied by one, two, three, or four stories, the horizontal pressure caused the business buildings to erupt into the air in the shape of the skyscrapers that are so familiar to us. It was only five years ago that we adopted an ordinance to correct the overgrowth of this congestion, but, now, we must go further. We must establish business and factories in the other boroughs. That involves passenger transit, freight transit, dock development, and the whole scope of intelligent city planning.

I believe this should be the principal task of the next Board of Estimate. The present Board has neither the ability nor the vision to have anything to do with it. But I hope the next Board will be equipped to handle it and to lead in this field. Too long we have striven, in our transit and housing efforts, to stay aboard a horse galloping in the wrong direction. Government has got to be the rider here, and the rider has got to lead the horse back in the right direction. We have got to help people to work near their homes and to live near their work, and to play near their homes as well.

The most absurd extreme of the whole thing is the eight and eleven o'clock rush hours in the 42d Street theatre district in the evening. As though we did not have enough all day, going to work in the morning and coming back in the evening, we insist on a third and fourth test of this choice experience by tacking it on before and after we go to the theatre. Go to Times Square at eleven o'clock this evening, go down into the subway, take one look at it, and ask yourself if there is any sense left in the comings and goings of our people.

We never can catch up by adding more spokes converging at the hub; we must add the laterals. But, before that, we must lead business and industry into other boroughs besides Manhattan. If you could turn a few of Manhattan's loft buildings into apartment houses, and put up new loft buildings in the flatlands of Queens, you would be doing something real and something lasting.

LOCAL CONTROL OF LOCAL PROBLEMS, VITAL

That is my constructive plan. It can only be accomplished gradually, but it must come, if we are ever to emerge from the transit blind alley through which we are now struggling. But, above all, let us insist that we have something to say ourselves about these matters as well as about the subsidiary questions of contracts between the City and transportation companies. Our only chance to work these things out to our own satisfaction is to do it ourselves under an increased rather than a decreased measure of home rule. As a City, we have made our mistakes, and we are at present enduring a four-year mistake that we made at the municipal election of 1917. But we shall survive that mistake. In local government, we slip back a step occasionally, but the next time we go two steps forward.

It was wrong to make our transportation system the prey of politics and finance, and it is wrong to deprive us of control over our own property. Two wrongs do not make a right. It is imperative that we solve our transit problem, and it is vital that we retain local control. Those two must go hand in hand.



**END OF
TITLE**